

1988 NSW-HOLLAND FESTIVAL

FAIRFIELD SHOWGROUND - February 26th, 27th, 28th.

PROGRAMME



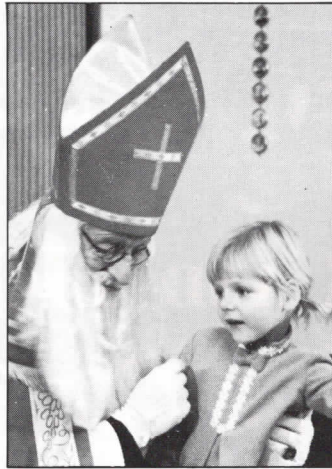
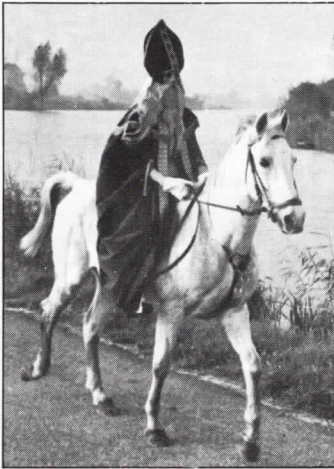
50c



An
Endorsed
Bicentennial
Activity

the birth of

Santa Claus



In the early days of December, when Holland's marine climate is at its foggy, drizzling worst, the Dutchman will look out of his window and happily announce, "It's real St. Nicholas weather!" Thus he welcomes a delightful annual event which for centuries has been uniquely Dutch and Flemish — the Feast of **Sinterklaas**.

True, St. Nicholas' Calendar Day, December 6th, is observed in most Roman Catholic countries, primarily as a feast for small children. But only in the Low Countries — and especially in the Netherlands — is the eve of his festival celebrated nationwide by young and old, rich and poor, Christian and Jew alike, and without any religious overtones. Although Sinterklaas is always presented in the vestments of the bishop he once was, his status as a Saint, duly canonized by the Church, has played no part in the Dutch mind for centuries. Rather, he is a kind of benevolent Superman, whose feast on the evening of December 5th is the merriest and most beguiling event of the Dutch year, when Hollanders exchange gifts and poke fun at each other to their hearts' content.

Why is Santa Claus in this form the exclusive property of the Dutch speaking peoples? Because of tradition. It just grew this way in the days before international

communications, when the people of any one country had plenty of time to gradually develop, enrich and hand down their own legends and customs, whether based on fact or fantasy. It so happens that the legend of St. Nicholas **is** based on historical fact. He **did** exist. Superman or not, he was born and he died like the rest of us. He lived, to be exact, from 271 A.D. to December 6, 342 or 343. His fourth-century tomb in the town of Myra, Asia Minor, has only recently been dug up by archaeologists. Born of a wealthy family, Nicholas was brought up as a devout Christian. When his parents died in an epidemic, he distributed his fortune among the poor and entered the priesthood.

Later he became Archbishop of Myra, a town not far from his home, and it is from here that the fame of his good deeds and saintly ways began to spread across the Mediterranean. He must have been an extraordinary man. For no sooner had he been buried than the line between fact and fantasy blurred and a fabulous series of legends and miracles sprang into being. The Good Bishop of Myra becalmed the stormy seas when desperate sailors invoked his name; prison walls crumbled as soon as victims of persecution prayed to him. He saved small children from the butcher's knife and dropped dowries in the shoes of

Good Saint Nicholas is in Holland once again With his horse and Peter from sunny Spain. And even if he
Sint Ni- klaasje kom maar bin-nen met je knecht, Enwe zit-ten al-le-maal e-ven recht, Mis- schien heeft u wel

can't stay long, We hope he'll stop to hear our song. Dear Saint Nicholas the door is o-pen wide, For you and
e-ven tijd, Voor u weer naar Span-je rijdt. Sint Ni- klaasje kom maar e-ven bij ons aan, Maar laat uw

Pete to step in-side. And we're singing, voices ringing, and our hearts rejoice 'Cause the Saint loves all good girls and boys.
schim-mel bui-ten staan. Enwe zin-gen en we springen en we zijn zo blij, Want er zijn geen stou-te kind-ren bij.



penniless maidens. In due course, Saint Nicholas became the patron saint of sailors and merchants and, especially of children. After Myra had fallen to the Mohammedans, sailors carried the precious bones of their patron to Bari, a port in southern Italy. They built a mausoleum over his grave which became the center of the St. Nicholas worship. From Bari the cult spread rapidly to coastal towns along the Atlantic and the North Sea. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Holland built no fewer than twenty-three St. Nicholas churches, many of which are still partially standing. Amsterdam, along with other European towns, adopted St. Nicholas as its patron saint and Rome decreed that December 6th, the anniversary of his death, be his official Calendar Day.

That St. Nicholas' influence was especially strong in the Low Countries is primarily due to his role as patron of merchants and sailors; the area's geography had predisposed it to trade and navigation. But once established, his fame as the benefactor of children took precedence. In the 14th century, choir boys of St. Nicholas Churches were given some money and the day off on December 6th. Somewhat later, the pupils of convent schools would be rewarded or punished by a teacher — monk disguised as the venerable bishop — just as he is still presented today with his long

white beard, his red mantle and mitre, and his golden crosier. Quite likely these very same schoolboys introduced St. Nicholas in their homes, for gradually his name, now corrupted to **Sinterklaas**, became a household word, his festival a nationwide event and his image the popular symbol of a stern yet benevolent moralist. In due time, Sinterklaas came accompanied by his Moorish servant Piet (Pete), a grinning fellow with a birch rod, whose sack full of goodies, when emptied, is large enough to carry away any naughty children.

By the 17th century, the Feast of Sinterklaas was so firmly established that famous Dutch painters and writers were inspired by it, and there are countless folksongs on the subject. It was at this time, too, that the Dutch settled in the New World where, among other customs, they introduced their venerable Sinterklaas. It isn't their fault, to be sure, that his image later merged with that of fat and jolly Father Christmas of British fame, who was feted in the same month. Since that time, and aided and abetted by other ethnic influences, the American Santa Claus has developed strictly on his own to the point where he is now stationed on the North Pole and drives a team of reindeer. All that remains of his Dutch phase is his name: Santa Claus is a direct derivation of Sinterklaas.



Sinterklaas eve

All Dutch children know that Sinterklaas lives in Spain. Why he does has many of their elders puzzled, but if we are to believe the old songs and nursery rhymes he must be a veteran resident, indeed. In Spain he spends most of the year recording the behaviour of all children in a big red book, while Piet stocks up on presents for next December 5th. After mid-November Sinterklaas mounts his milk-white steed, Piet swings the sack full of gifts over his shoulder, and the three board a steamship to set course for Amsterdam harbour and a formal welcome by the Mayor and a delegation of citizens. A fabulous parade through town, watched live and on TV by the whole nation, marks the beginning of the St. Nicholas season.

From now on, time and space merge as the old bishop and his helpmate are everywhere at once. At night they ride across Holland's rooftops. While Sinterklaas listens through the chimneys to check the children's

behaviour, Piet sees to it that the hay or carrot, left for the horse in each little shoe by the fireplace, is exchanged for a small gift or some candy. In daytime they are even busier, what with visiting all classrooms and hospitals, many department stores, restaurants and offices, and innumerable private homes. They ride in parades, distribute gifts and reprimands, and listen attentively to boisterous singing and scarcely audible confessions. And what if the old gentleman is sometimes excused from visiting every family? Piet will ring doorbells, scatter goodies through the slightly opened doors and leave a basketful of presents on the steps.

But if they are busy in the days before Sinterklaas Eve, so are the Dutch - all of them. Shopping is the least of it, for a Sinterklaas present is not at all like a Christmas present three weeks ahead of time. Dutch tradition demands that all packages be camouflaged in some imaginative way, and that each gift be accompanied by a fitting poem.

For this is the essence of Sinterklaas: sheer, unadulterated fun on the one day when plain kidding is not only permitted, but expected between parents and teachers and the the children; between employers and employees; and in all troupe of society without the slightest regard for differences in age and social status. One part of the fun is the make-up of packages, and a pretty gift wrapping is not it. To be truly




appreciated, presents must be concealed and disguised. Recipients must be willing to follow a trail of directions all over the house to look for them; they must be prepared to dig them out of the potato bin, to find them hidden in a jello pudding, in a glove filled with wet sand, in some crazy dummy or doll. They have to work for their presents, and the givers have to work even harder to think them up and to get them ready. But as this so called **surprise** giving is an old custom, the Dutch are quite adept at it and their imagination never seems to run dry. Teenagers are especially good at his kind of thing. To write a poem with each present is another old custom, and a particularly tough one. In these Sinterklaas rhymes - long or short; good, bad or indifferent - the real kidding comes into the open, the giver has his fling. He'll bring out some foible, a love interest, a recent incident, in fact, anything to cause embarrassment, as long as it is good-natured and in good taste. The butt of the joke, who has to open his package in public and read the poem aloud amid general hilarity, does this manfully for he, too, has something in store for his tormentor. Just wait!

As every **surprise** comes as a gift from Sinterklaas and every poem is signed by that worthy, the real giver is supposedly anonymous. Recipients say a loud 'Thank you, Sinterklaas!' whether they do or no longer believe in the Saint's existence. It is, in fact, this very anonymity, this hiding under the bishop's wide red

cloak, that keeps the tradition alive and popular among all age groups. For isn't it tempting once a year to be able to speak out and get away with it? Wasn't it Sinterklass who said it, and isn't he omniscient and above suspicion? Therefore, toward December 5th, St. Nicholas poems pop up in every sector of Dutch society; in the press, in school, at work and on stage, indeed, in both Houses of Parliament. It is expected; time is made available for it; and it is enjoyed by all and sundry.

But after supper on Sinterklaas Eve, the Dutch are at home, seated around a table laden with all traditional sweets and bakery goods known since the days when the seventeenth-century painters gave us their version of the feast. Large chocolate initials serve as place settings along with so called 'lovers', tall men and women of **speculaas**, a crisp and dark-brown pastry rather like gingerbread. A basket filled with mysterious packages stands close by and scissors are at hand. Gifts are unwrapped and poems are read one at a time so that all may enjoy the originality of the **surprise**, the embarrassment of the reader and the valiant efforts of the proud perpetrator not to disclose his identity. The emphasis, here, is on giving rather than on receiving, because so much work and thought goes into it - one reason why Sinterklaas is such a delightful event. But it is also a merry and a refreshingly artless feast. That, at least, is the way the Hollander feels about it, and he wouldn't do without it! Thank you, Sinterklaas.



Grolsch
A BREWERS MASTERPIECE
FROM HOLLAND

FOR YOUR
GROLSCH STOCKIST
(RETAIL & RESTAURANTS)
CONTACT (02) 648-4511
OR (008) 42-4383
S. SMITH & SON P/L,
30 SKARRATT STREET, AUBURN
NSW 2144